

# Interview with Professor J. Donald Hughes

## Entrevista com professor J. Donald Hughes

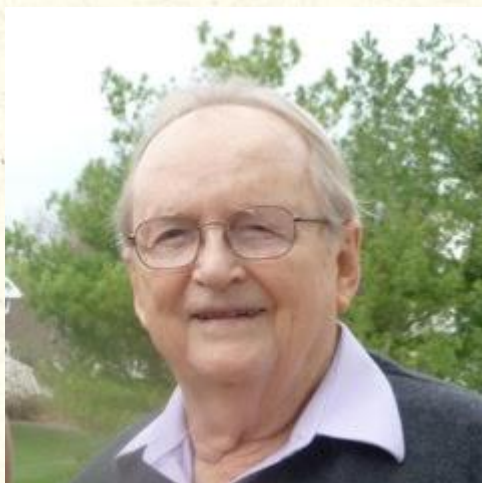
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Invited by the Editor

## ON J. DONALD HUGHES



J. Donald Hughes is John Evans Distinguished Professor, and Professor Emeritus of History, at the University of Denver. He lives in Princeton, New Jersey. His research fields are environmental history (world), world history, ancient history (Greece, Rome, and Egypt), and Pacific islands history. Among his recent publications are *What Is Environmental History?*, (Polity, 2006, second edition 2015), *An Environmental History of the World: Humankind's Changing Role in the Community of Life* (Routledge, second edition 2009), *The Mediterranean: An Environmental History* (ABC-CLIO, 2005), and *Environmental Problems of the Greeks and Romans* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996, second edition 2014). He is a founding member of the American Society for Environmental History (organized in 1976), the European Society for Environmental History, and the South Asian Environmental History society. He serves on the board of

the East Asian Association of Environmental Historians. He is past editor of the journal, *Environmental History* (then titled *Environmental Review*). He received the Distinguished Service Award of ASEH in 2000. He has served as a research associate of the Denver Museum of Nature and Science, and is a member of Phi Beta Kappa. His undergraduate degree was completed at the University of California at Los Angeles, and his Ph.D. at Boston University, with graduate study at Cambridge University, UK, and the American School of Classical Studies at Athens, Greece. He has given invited lectures on environmental history in Athens, Bangalore, Beijing, Berlin, Bochum (Germany), Braga (Portugal), Chicago, Delhi, Florianopolis (Brazil), Guelin, Hualien (Taiwan), Istanbul, Kaua'i, Kolkata, Leiden, Leipzig, Madison, St Andrews (Scotland), Taipei, and Tianjin. He has volunteered in archaeological projects in Easter Island, Fiji, and Hawai'i. In: <https://portfolio.du.edu/dhughes>.



**EN:** Today is the 18th of November of 2011 and we are in the city of Florianópolis, Santa Catarina, at the “2º Workshop Internacional sobre desastres ambientais e sustentabilidade”, to make an interview with Professor Donald Hughes. Dear Donald it is a great pleasure in having you here with us. Samira Peruchi Moretto and Alfredo Ricardo Lopes are helping us in this interview. I know about your background, we were talking about some days ago, and your background is Biology. So we are really interested in knowing why you became involved, what interested you in history, and mainly in environmental history.

**DH:** I think I was attracted to history because it is one of those subjects that include everything. I have never liked to be a very narrow specialist, I like to do the whole subject, so I thought history would be the best subject to go on for my PhD. And then in environmental history, I have always had a very strong interest in nature. I spent time in the National Parks, in US in Sequoia National Park and I worked for many years at the Grand Canyon as a Ranger there in the summer times. I just felt that I wanted to do a subject where I could combine my interest in nature, my background in biology with history. And that's how I ended up in Environmental History. At that time, there was no such subject, so some of us had to get together and invent the field.

**EN:** Then you started at the same period of time that Donald Worster working with EH or before that?

**DH:** Donald and I at about the same time.

**EN:** You were colleagues then...

**DH:** Yes, but he was a very strong figure in the early period. He is a wonderful scholar and a writer, and we were lucky to have him in our field.

**EN:** And did you belong to Sierra Club too?

**DH:** Yes, I belong to Sierra Club from when I was quite young. I probably joined when I was 18, 19... and went on, many of their hikes. There is a connection with Environmental History because the Sierra Club was founded by John Muir in 1892. So it is a part of that side of my interest.

**EN:** Yes, and you also told me that you are retired now, but you are still working a lot, you went to China, you are here now... and also in Princeton. Are you working there too, or you are just making it because you really enjoy, have a pleasure in doing it?

**DH:** I am doing it mainly for the pleasure, I would not be happy if I were not writing and travelling. But in fact, what happened is that when I retired I continued to receive invitations to go to places like this but how could I go, if I were teaching would have to turn down a lot of these invitations.

**EN:** When you travelled to China, you spent 8 weeks there. How was your impression about the Environment there, and the studies of Environmental History?

**DH:** Yes, about the environment, I knew that there were problems. But I was definitely shocked by the extent to which the country is polluted. The air pollution is very noticeable, and although I had been there before... I happened to come at the time for the Olympic games, and they had cleaned things up. And this time there were terrible episodes of air pollution and I know that the water pollution problems are also very great. So that's one side of the question. The other side, though, is environmental history. I was very pleased to see that environmental history is a subject in many of the universities there, in particular at Beijing Normal University, where I taught for seven weeks.



**DH:** I would like to add, about China, that the students are very good there. Many of them speak English well and they are dedicated to the work that they are doing in History. And it was wonderful to be able to sit with them in small discussion groups and to talk to them about their work. So I had a very good time.

**EN:** Were they graduate or undergraduate students?

**DH:** Graduate students.

**ARSL:** You wrote an important book entitled “What is Environmental History?” would you define Environmental History as a paradigm, an analysis category or are there any other definitions?

**DH:** Many environmental historians would define it as a field within history that is concerned with the environment. I do not think so. I think it is much more widely useful than that. That is, to look at it in one respect, E.H. is a tool that is available for historians in whatever field they happen to be working. And Leopold von Ranke said, in the 19th century, “we want to study history as it actually was”. If we are going to do that, we have to look at the environment because that is not just the setting, not just the background, but it is an actor, it is a force within history. In a sense, it includes all the other aspects and therefore, if we are going to be true historians in that sense, we do have to look at the environmental aspect. So I would recommend historians in whatever particular subject they work to look at that aspect.

**SPM:** Since the 1970's the demand for environmental researches has been increasing, in this scenario what are the Environmental History contributions?

**DH:** There are really, again, two aspects to that question. One is the connection of environmental history with environmental concern and because the environment represents so many problems, in the present

day, it is a matter of concern for a number of groups (non-governmental organizations, national governments and international consideration – the UN and so forth), it is important to have environmental history as a way of providing perspective in seeing how these problems have evolved to where they are today, and what the human response is to them, and also what people have thought about nature, in that time / period.

The other aspect is that we have made such great progress in science, in environmental science, over this period, that historians need to be cognizant of that, and to let it inform our work.

**ARSL:** In your books “An Environmental History of the World” and “Pan's Travail: Environmental Problems of the Ancient Greeks and Romans” there is a special interest about Ancient topics. What are the reasons for this special interest?

**DH:** That has to do with my interest in the classics – Greek and Roman classics. I do both Greek and Latin as my languages; particularly reading ancient works hence also I have had a lifelong interest in that area. I was teaching a class in Ancient History in California Western University and I wanted to get more background for that. I had been to Greece a couple of times before that, but I went back and spent a year at the American School of Classics Studies in Athens. So I had a concentrated period of studying Greek in particular, but also Roman history. And my question was, to myself, did they have anything like an environmental concern. Were they interested in conservation, and I had colleagues that said “Oh you will never find anything”, but it proved to be true, that there were certain very important aspects of Greek and Roman History, for example the sacred groves where they preserved the tree species that were there. There was the interest in the environment by Aristotle, in particular, but also the students of his school wrote about botany and gave us a lot of information about trees and the forests and so on. So that is why I went into that field and why my first Environmental History book was on the Classical period, the Mediterranean area. It happens just this year, I was asked to do another edition of that book [the third edition, which



appeared in 2014], so I am working on that, hope to bring up to date, since lots of research has been done in the years that have passed by.

**EN:** Since we are talking about ancient period, in your books, you discuss about some issues regarding the medieval period. What you find more interesting about this period, since very little is published about it?

**DH:** I think that E.H. has to include all of the periods. That is, most of the work that has been done in E.H. is in the modern period, at least since the Industrial Revolution. We definitely need to look at Medieval Period and the Ancient Period, and even including periods where archeology is our major source of information.

**SPM:** “The use of Environmental History to analyze disasters” was the main theme of the 2nd International Workshop of Environmental History: Environmental Disasters and Sustainability. What is your opinion about the researches that were shown here?

**DH:** It’s fascinating to me, I wondered about the question “what is natural disaster?” and almost by definition the disaster is only a disaster because humans are suffering. So we have to look both the natural events that happen and humans that either contribute to the causes, or by putting themselves in places that become subject to natural disasters, building things in locations that we know may suffer floods, or earthquake, or tsunamis. Part of it is what happens in natural disasters and you look for a natural explanation for that maybe, but also humans decisions are of critical importance, and we have seen that during our recent field trip, when we went to risk areas where houses were carried away by landslides and then people coming back and building a house exactly in the same place. Seems like a bad decision.

**EN:** Yes.

**SPM:** We would like to know what are your impressions on the Brazilian and Latin American productions of Environmental History?

**DH:** I'm learning about that, this conference and other places where I have found a lot more than I knew and I am very impressed with the work that's being done, and I hope to say more about it in the next edition of my "What is Environmental History?" book. There is a lot here and it is very valuable.

**ARSL:** You visited different places like Beijing, Chicago, Leiden, Athens, Istanbul, Bangalore and Prague, how these different places have contributed for your environmental researches?

**DH:** I think of that, one of the aspects that is necessary for environmental historians is to see as much as possible of the places they are writing about. Because we can have one impression from books and papers, but need to look at the environment itself, at the land, and what's happening there in terms of human development in different kinds, to talk to people, to get some senses of attitudes that they have. You might have noted, I said this in my "Environmental World History" book, I hesitate to do case studies on places where I have not been, and I was forced to do that only in one case, that was in Iraq.

**EN:** And what is the stage of the environmental history production in these places?

**DH:** There are places where environmental history has some history itself, you know, some duration in time in those areas. That would be the U.S. and Europe and there other areas where it has been developing for a time, now where there is an organization that represents E.H., and that would be Latin America-Caribbean, it would be India, where is strong interest, I should mention Canada and Australia too; they have very good research, and now the East Asian area. I happened to be at the first meeting just recently in Taipei (Taiwan) and they had a good attendance with some impressive papers. So, in those areas the environmental history



profession is becoming established and active. There are a couple of blanks on the map, which we unfortunately have, but we can hope for growing interest there.

**EN:** How would you define environmental history?

**DH:** Environmental history is the study of the evolution of the human relationship, human societies, to nature. “Evolution” is an important word because is changing from time to time.

**EN:** There is a discussion about ecological history and environmental history what do you think about the differences, because we have this discussion here in Brazil sometimes?

**DH:** Yes, if is not just matters terminology, there are two things that we can study: One is the history of the environment; and other is the history of the human relationship with the environment. And to me environmental history is the second.

**EN:** I agree with you. And we have a last question for you.

**ARSL:** What are your future projects regarding environmental history?

**DH:** Future productions, ok. It is so important and necessary and there is so much enthusiasm for E.H., particularly among young scholars, that I think it is going to continue to grow. And I hope that the growth will spread to parts of the world that are only marginally represented now. Africa would be one of those, there are good environmental historians in Africa, but they are not large in number; it could really became stronger I think, and South Africa will probably lead that effort, I am talking about sub-Saharan Africa. And then the other area is the whole Islamic world. I am looking for work in that area, there are some good



books there, but again what I said about Africa is probably true there too. I have gone to Istanbul and I just hope that historians in that area will see the importance of this work, and that will be developed in their own universities, and not just people outside studying the middle east. That is one of areas that we need to fill in. There is impressive new work being done on the Ottoman Empire. I'm interested in the Pacific islands myself, and in that area [environmental history studies] are very active, for example in Hawaii, Australia and New Zealand. But Indonesia is an area that really needs to have more work done.

**EN:** It is really grateful a discussion with such a distinguished scholar like you. We have more five minutes to finish our interview. I know that your wife is a really enthusiastic of your work; she always goes with you in the trips?

**DH:** Oh, yes. Well, my wife is a music historian; she has a degree in music history and works in the developing field of ecomusicology. So, I discover that we educate one and other, I teach her about environmental history and she teaches me about music. We join together as much as we can and we enjoy dancing to Brazilian music here.

**EN:** Oh, good! You're such a lovely couple.

**DH:** We sing together in a choir, I sing tenor, she sings soprano, and so we keep active in things that we can do together. I must say I very much prefer traveling with her than by myself, because we can support one another pretty well.

**EN:** What message can you give for the future students on environmental history?

**DH:** I would say choose a subject that you love, you know, really involves you, not just eventually but emotionally because this is so important. You will be able to keep that for the rest of your life. And I think, history is one of the subjects that are getting better the older you get (laughs).

**EN:** Thank you so much, it was wonderful. I hope to see you very soon again here or in another place around the world

**DH:** Oh, I hope to come back. I want to look at the coastal forest.

**EN:** Yes, next time we will visit the forest, Alfredo can go to the coastal because he lives in the south of the state too. I think your interview was a great lesson for us thanks a lot.

**ARSL:** I am really grateful about the lesson and I learned too much, thank you.

**SPM:** Very important meet someone like you, it is very important because I read your books and now we are together.

**DH:** Oh, you are helping me to learn and I want to learn as much about Brazil, especially this part of Brazil, as I possibly can.